

Western Feminist Consciousness in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

Zahra Barfi^a, Sarieh Alaei^b

Department of English Language and Literature, College of English,
Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran

^{a,b}E-mail address: barfi.zahra64@gmail.com , zohre.alaei@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Feminism is a collection of movements which struggles for women's rights. Focusing on gender as a basis of women's sexual oppression, feminist scholarship attempts to establish equal rights for women politically, economically, socially, personally, etc. *The Joys of Motherhood* highlights Buchi Emecheta's critical view toward colonialism and racism affecting Third world women's lives. Besides this, Emecheta goes further to display African women's invisibility and marginalization- which were out of sight for a long time- in terms of some aspects of Western feminist discourse. Her creative discourse, in this regard, casts further light upon the issue of gender oppression in African feminist study. Hence, this study attempts to examine the way in which Emecheta furthers Western feminist ideology.

Keywords: Buchi Emecheta; *The Joys of Motherhood*; Western feminist ideology

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Nigeria was colonized by English empire, colonialism, racism and their effects on black people were the subjects of many Nigerian writings. Emecheta is known as a black Nigerian female writer who speaks for Nigerian women's domination and marginalization within the Igbo society. She notices how Igbo women are treated in a precolonial, colonial and postcolonial periods- what is dismissed and disregarded for years. So, along with criticizing colonialism and racism, she highlights the issue of gender as a basis for sexual right. Like most of her works, *The Joys of Motherhood*, her masterpiece, documents the trace of gender oppression, sexual difference and gender inequality. That's why her works are told to be involved the trace of western feminism. However, Emecheta avoids to be called a western feminism.

In this case, Shaluni Nadaswaran (2012) mentions that: "we find Buchi Emecheta and Marima Ba being defensive and indignant whenever they are referred to as feminist. In fact, Buchi Emecheta states that her type of feminism is an African type of feminism called womanism"(146). Alice Walker, a founder of womanism, is of the opinion that due to "their double identity, black women are the victims of both sexism (sexual discrimination) and racism (racial discrimination)" (Kohzadi, et al., 2011: 1307).

2. SEXUAL POLITICS IN BLACK FEMINISM

Black feminism is the acknowledgement that women of color have been oppressed by the intersection of sexual and racial forces. Accordingly, it affiliates to the postcolonial feminist movement- regarding the common context of struggle against racism. In order to examine if Buchi Emecheta invokes some concepts of Western feminism in *The Joys of Motherhood*; therefore, it is necessary to consider the sexual politics in this movement as well.

According to Evelyn Hammonds, "Black woman's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a 'void' or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women's bodies are already colonized"(qtd in Collins 2000, 123).

Asserting women's silence where black women's bodies are sexually oppressed, black feminist scholar notes that "Black women's sexuality is either ignored or included primarily in relation to African-American men's issues" (124). Regarding this context, women's sexual oppression in native patriarchy should be silenced. Black women's sexual harassment can be discussed in the Black Feminist discourse, merely, if it is related to white men. For, in this case, it can be discussed in terms of *Race*.

Collins in her discussion, mentions the story of Anita Hill's sexual harassment by her employer, Thomas, a black man. Ignoring the racial difference, white American women, out of global sisterhood around the idea of sexual oppression, recognize this sexual harassment as a "landmark event" (126). In contrast, US black men and women suggest that even if Thomas was a sexual harasser Hill should be silent (ibid). Lisa Jones, in this context, notes that Hill's story sent, implicitly, this message: "speaking out doesn't pay.

A harassed woman is still a double victim, and a vocal, critical black woman is still a traitor to the race" (qtd in Collins 2000, 126). By description, black women are not permitted to speak and discuss on some topics, for instance sexuality, if they are "unmediated by the question of racism"(Giddings; qtd in Collins 124). Accordingly, as Collins points out, demystifying black women's sexual oppression in "white racist construction" is acceptable while disclosing sexual oppression that contributes to the black men should be dismissed. In fact, in terms of context, "it violates norms of radical solidarity that counsel Black women always to put our own needs second" (124).

Regarding these racial boundaries, Collins, furthermore, suggests that even some topics are more acceptable than others. Black women's rape, for instance, by white men during the slavery period can be noticed and discussed while black women's rape by Black men cannot. Accordingly, regarding the "issue of sexuality", black women should be silent. Merely, those elements of their sexuality can be examined that have an intersection with racial issue. Collins, in this context, notes that "[t]he cost is that other elements remain off limits. Rape, incest, misogyny in Black cultural practices, and other painful topics that might implicate Black men remain taboo" (ibid). Regarding the U.S. culture that the defined black women as immoral, he indicates that:

[i]n situations where regulating Black women's bodies benefited systems of race, class, and gender alike, protecting the safe spaces for Black women's self-definitions often required public silences about seemingly provocative topics. ... In a climate where one's sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount (125). Accordingly, in this context, where "internal self- censorship"(ibid), in Collins's sense, is regarded as protection, "silence made sense" (ibid).

Womanism developed in condition where black scholars and activists believed that Western Feminism didn't completely consider black women's problem. Rather it fought for white, heterosexual middle-class women's right and social equality. Referring to Western

feminism, Ama Ata Aidoo, an African critic and novelist, indicates that "Feminism, you know how we feel about embarrassing Western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African women" (qtd in Blackmon 2008, 23).

Suffering from the historical racial oppression, black men and women know themselves as equal partners in struggles against the racial oppression.

3. WESTERN FEMINISM AND THE ISSUE OF GENDER

Focusing on gender as a basis of women's sexual oppression, feminist scholarship attempts to establish equal rights for women. It attempts to give a voice to women and expose the extent to which women are oppressed and marginalized within the patriarchal society. According to Guerin (2005), feminism focuses on the subjugation and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, "a culture organized in the favor of men"(223). Simon de Beauvoir asserts that "female is regarded as the "other", an object who is defined and theorized by the male dominated society. In this regard, gender identity is constructed by culture and they are not 'eternal norms' (226). In this regard, they consider women's experience and their gender identity in a patriarchal society. "Sexual Difference", "Gender Inequality", and "Gender Oppression" are the fundamental concepts discussing in Western Feminist discourse.

4. WESTERN FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

Being regarded as a black feminist and postcolonial feminist novel which criticizes the intersection of oppressive forces – race, gender and class- and highlights their effects on the disempowered African women's lives, *The Joys of Motherhood*, nevertheless, accommodates some aspects of Western feminism in order to highlight women's gender oppression, gender inequality and sexual difference within the Igbo patriarchal society.

It points out the way in which women are silenced and oppressed by native patriarchy and this oppression is not mediated by race. However, "concentrating on gender oppression alone would never make sense for [women of color and Third World women] who always experienced sexual and racial oppression as linked and compounded"(Lewis & Mills 2003, 5). Polygamy, motherhood, marriage, women's reproductive right, educational right, and else, as the sources of gender oppression, are among the key concepts discussed in this discourse

5. WOMEN: THE FORBIDDEN OTHER

Besides criticizing colonialism and its influential effects on African society and especially black women, Emecheta in *the Joys of Motherhood*, criticizes the native patriarchy for oppressing, dismissing and dominating the disempowered female characters. She exposes that how, in Ibuza, a native patriarchal society, gender determines who is "superior" and who is considered as "other".

We are told that Ona is not permitted to marry her father. After her father's death she goes to live with Agbadi and her daughter. But while giving birth to a new child, she dies. Discussing on Ona's death, Emecheta, in her interview, highlight the patriarchal power over females lives. She notes that Ona is sentenced to death because she disobeys the patriarchy

(qtd In Willey 2000, 9). This statement declares the extent to which women's freedom and lives are controlled by patriarchal tradition.

In a sexual affair, Ona is denied to have her pleasure as soon as he has his satisfaction: "he wanted her completely humiliated in her burning desire" (Emecheta 1979, 20). In this statement, Emecheta, indeed, criticizes the native patriarchy which dehumanizes women, the forbidden other. As we have already examined, Emecheta criticizes the male authority for treating women as inferior other. She questions the power of the patriarchal discourse over female's freedom. She depicted a society in which women are regarded as "second class citizen", at the bottom of patriarchal hierarchies.

6. POLYGAMY: A SITE OF GENDER OPPRESSION

Highlighting the issue of polygamy in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta, indeed, casts further light upon the issue of sexuality and women's sexual oppression in African feminism. According to Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), Western feminist discourse limited their analysis of gender inequality to woman's biology and/ or her sexuality and how it has been sanctioned either by patriarchy or by the phallus. Women's sexuality is, on the one hand, controlled by an unbalanced sexual division of labor that manipulates women's procreative; on the other hand, women's body is presented as a pleasure-based entity whose drive have either been sanctioned or repressed (24).

We are exposed that female's sexual pleasures are neglected within the polygamous system. Agbadi disregards his wives for years. They just receive one yam a day. He sleeps with his mistress while his wives wish to hear a word from him (Emecheta 1979, 36). This statement highlights the extent to which women are sexually oppressed and disregarded within the igbo patriarchal discourse. She is dismissed after a while, like a commodity.

In this regard, following some aspects of Western feminist ideology discussing on women's sexual oppression and harassment, Emecheta, in her novel, is going to question the male authority and the polygamous system of oppression as well. She attempts to give a voice to the disenfranchised silent African women, to give them a "room of their own", and to cast light upon women's invisibility and oppression within the African patriarchy, something which should be dismissed and silenced about in black feminist realm of study- because gender oppression is permitted to be study, merely, in relation to race and/or class.

7. EDUCATION: A ROOM OF THEIR OWNS

As discussed, Western feminism questions the phallogocentric thought that limits woman to domestic labor. Liberal feminist, in this context, examines how women are prevented from having opportunity to play their role in the society and to excess achievement. In this regard, Virginia Woolf, referring to Shakespeare's sister as one who is as gifted as Shakespeare himself, notes that Shakespeare's sister is not a writer because she is a woman and thus her gender doesn't permit her to have "a room of her own". Because she is female she is prevented from having the educational opportunity. Following Western feminists who demand for women's educational right, Emecheta offers her critique on the African patriarchy which provides the educational opportunity merely for boys. Emecheta, in this regard, offers her critical view through her character Adaku, who is the representation of a liberal woman. Knowing education as a way to women's freedom, she wants her daughters to be educated. By description, Emecheta, indeed, encourages African women to be educated in order to have "a room of their owns".

8. MOTHERHOOD: THE JOYS OF [M]OTHERHOOD

To expose women's more oppression and subjugation within the African patriarchal institution, Emecheta invokes Western feminist ideology of "Motherhood" in order to criticize the African patriarchal definition of "*mothering*".

The term "motherhood" is one of the central focuses of Western feminism. In feminist discourse, motherhood is regarded as a source of women's oppression and isolation. Radical feminists in the 1960s and the early 1970s- the time of the discussed novel's composition- assert that "[the] joys of motherhood is a kind of 'false consciousness', it really is a power relation and women are duped into thinking that it holds any promise of sovereignty or free expression" (Kinser 2010, 7).

The Joys of Motherhood, indeed, unfolds the story of a protagonist female figure, Nnu Ego, who acknowledges the joys of her life in being mother: to have a lot of children in order to have a comfortable old age. As a devoted mother, she sacrifices herself in order to feed and clothe her children. Various depictions in the novel document this. In certain respect, Emecheta, in her critical writing, offers her critique on the patriarchal definition of motherhood through her character Nnu Ego. "Motherhood", therefore, can be regarded as a patriarchal institution in which women are the subjects of oppression and domination.

We are told that Nnu Ego is responsible to feed her children, no matter how difficult the situation is. Whilst Nnu Ego begs for money in order to feed her children, Nnaif chortles and says "I'm not giving you a penny, because I haven't a penny to give" (Emecheta 1979, 136). Then he goes on to assert "[i]t's your responsibility to feed your children as best you can" (ibid). This extract, indeed, encodes the extent to which a woman is treated as a subject of oppression by the patriarchal relations. She is not but man's slave, surrounded by responsibilities determined for her. She should sacrifice herself because she is a mother. It discloses why it seems to Nnu Ego that "she was a prison, imprisoned by her love for her children [...] it was not fair she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her" (137).

The extent of oppression and marginalization Nnu Ego, as a mother, experiences, hence, bodes Emecheta's critical view toward the African patriarchy. However, it doesn't mean Emecheta is devaluating mothering, rather it means that she is criticizing the way in which the African patriarchal institution defines motherhood: as a patriarchal relation.

Moreover, being alone- her husband was absent most of the time-, Nnu Ego does her best to look after her children, even in the worst condition. She does petty business, sells firewood, and else, all because of her children. Even she saves money for her sons' educational fees. Once she says "On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them; I have to give them my all. And if I'm lucky enough to die in peace, I have to give them my soul"(186). At the end of the novel, we come to know how Nnu Ego grows faint. Adim knows that her mother is not old in age; however, she looked in her seventies (213).

Hence, we are exposed that how Nnu Ego, as a devoted mother, sacrifices her youth, health and life for her children. Even, she has no time to make many friends: "she had never really made many friends, so busy had she building up her joys as a mother"(224). Therefore, she dies, a lonely death, with no child and no friend to talk to her.

Furthermore, Emecheta goes on to question the Igbo patriarchal society which blames Nnu Ego "for bringing up children badly" (219). The following extract exposes the end of the patriarchal cruel judgment while dismisses Nnu Ego's sacrifice: "Ibuza people blame me: they say I didn't bring you all up well because I spent most of my time selling things in the market" (212). But, indeed, if Nnu Ego didn't attempt to feed her children all her life and

some of them die of malnutrition, doesn't the patriarchal society blame her again? It is in this regard that Nnu Ego, after her death doesn't answer women who appeal to her to make them fertile:

[s]till, many agreed that she has given all to her children. The joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children, they said; and her reward? Did she not have the greatest funeral Ibuza had ever seen? It took Oshia three years to pay off the money he had borrowed to show the world what a good son he was. That was why people failed to understand why she didn't answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial? (224).

The Joys of Motherhood, in this context, then, is the ironic title by which Emecheta is going to disclose the suffering, oppression and loneliness which an African mother experiences within the male dominated society. To manifest this, Emecheta furthers Western feminist theory in order to question the African patriarchal institution and to improve the quality of African women's lives.

9. MARRIAGE: A SITE OF WOMEN'S "OTHERNESS"

To question the marriage institution as a site of African women's oppression and gender inequality, Emecheta, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, follows Western feminism. By the 1970s, regarding "marriage", feminist scholars assert that: [M]en had invented marriage to oppress women. Through such means as kidnapping, rape, and the use or the threat of force, men established dominance over women. This gave men control of women's sexual activity and reproduction, ensuring that they were the fathers of the children their mates bore (Steffoff 2006, 36).

The Joys of Motherhood details African women's oppression within the patriarchal institution of marriage. Regarding as the subject of oppression, they lose any individuality. They are considered as men's property, like "commodities that only appeal to the owner whilst still new" (Nyanhongo 2011, 72). Moreover, their lives are dominated and controlled by men, they are considered as the means of reproduction, "mere chattels and [...] their principle role is to attend to the needs of their men and to produce children, especially male children" (Killam 2004, 44).

This is evident in Nnu Ego's case. When she seems to be infertile, in her first marriage, Amatokwa, her first husband, tells her that "she would have to move to nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife" (Emecheta 1979, 32).

Thereafter, she is dismissed and disregarded by her husband. Amatokwa speaks to her, merely, when it is necessary. Above all, at the farmer, he behaves her like a servant. Once, when she complains, he mentions: "what do you want me to do? [...] I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my live" (ibid). In this quotation, Emecheta highlights the extent of women's dehumanization. They are not but a means of reproduction. They even don't deserve a life if they fail to produce children. Women don't have any individuality, anything of their own for they are wo/men: men's property and their appendage. This statement is evident in the novel when Agbadi confesses Ibuza men want women "who could claim to be helpless without them" (36). Therefore, women's dependency and subservience is what they appeal to. In the society depicted by Emecheta, the only honor for a woman with a lot of sons is a decent burial.

Moreover, Western feminist ideology of women's reproductive right can be traced in *The Joys of Motherhood*. In some respects, Emecheta depicts a society in which women are subjugated to male authority because they are women: the inferior other; they are not as

rational and intelligent as men are. Accordingly, they have no right to choose whom they love and to decide whether they want to have or not to have children. This statement can be examined in the case of the female characters in this novel. Nnaife is absent most of the time but whenever he returns, he makes her wives pregnant. In every episode, we are told that his wives are pregnant. Even when he returns from the war, after a long time absent, he makes Nnu Ego pregnant immediately and then he goes to Ibuza, for the first time during these years, and makes his old wife, Adankwo who was his brother's widow, pregnant. While criticizing him, Nnu Ego complains: "[h]ave you been commissioned by the white people you fought for to replace all those that died during the war? Why don't you let other men do part of the job. Even Adankwo whom we regard as our mother is pregnant for you, just you" (184). These extracts encode the way in which the patriarchal violence dominates women's bodies for its own sake. So women are denied their right to decide for their own body and their lives. They should be subjugated to the patriarchal hegemony.

Furthermore, Emecheta exposes how a man is regarded as a master and God to his wives, just because he is man, the unquestionable authority. Various events in this story document this. Remarkably, when Nue Ego is questioned in the court: who pays Adim's educational fees? She replies: "Nnaif is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in the other words he pays" (217). This statement points out how women are treated as slaves, as men's subservient and they themselves acknowledge their slavery.

Various events in this novel bear this fact out. When Nnu Ego, after her first son's death decides to commit suicide, Nwakusor, a family friend, prevents her to throw herself off the Bridge. However, he saves her life, the way he speaks to her exposes the patriarchal nature of the Igbo society. He tells her: "What are you trying to do to your husband, your father, your people and your son who is only a few weeks old? You want to kill yourself, eh? Who is going to look after your baby for you? You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood"(61).

The way he criticizes her discloses women's place in the patriarchal society: as the second class citizen. As Nyanhongo (2011) observes, it seems that "as if he were saying 'the air in you that you are trying to take out belongs to your husband or your father who control it, have you asked for permission?' "(71). This statement, furthermore, declares that how women are considered as men's property. She has no right to kill herself for she has no right to choose: she is her men's property.

So, Emecheta highlights Western feminism idea that women are regarded as an empty category, nothing without men. in Beauvoir's sense it is men who define "what it means to be human, including what it means to be female" (Bressler 2007, 173). She mentions that female is regarded as the "Other", an object who is defined and theorized by the male dominated society.

10. CONCLUSION

Colonialism brought about many changes for Nigeria. In this condition, Igbo women faced with double oppression. Their oppression and marginalization, however, within their own patriarchal society was dismissed and silenced about for many years- for gender oppression was permitted to be study merely in relation to race. In this regard, following some aspects of western feminist ideology discussing on women's gender oppression and inequality, Emecheta, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, is going to question the male authority in a patriarchal society in precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. She attempts to give a voice to the disenfranchised silent African women, to give them a "room of their own", and to cast further light upon women's invisibility and oppression within the African patriarchy.

References

- [1] Blackmone, Janiece L. "I Am Because We Are: Africana Womanism as a Vehicle of Empowerment and Influence." Diss. Virginia Polytechnic University, 2008.
- [2] Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: an Introduction to theory and practice*. 4th.ed. New Jersey: upper Saddle River, 2007.
- [3] Collins, Patricia L. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd. ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.
- [4] Emecheta, Buchi. *The Joys of Motherhood*. New York: Gorge Braziller, Inc., 1979.
- [5] Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 5th. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [6] Killam, Dougals. *Literature of Africa*. London: Greenwood Press, 2004.
- [7] Kohzadi Hamedreza, Fatemeh, Azizmohammadi, and Shahram Afrougheh. A Study of Black Feminism and Womanism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from the Viewpoint of Alice Walker. *International Journal of Academic Research*, 3(2) (2011).
- [8] Lewis, Reina, and Mills, Sara, ed. *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- [9] Nadaswaran, shalini. "The Legacy of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Women's Fiction. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 2 (2012) 146-150.
- [10] Kinser, Amber E. *Motherhood and Feminism: Seal Studies*. California: Seal Press, 2010.
- [10] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana M. *Gender in African women's writing: identity, sexuality, and difference*. United States: Indiana University Press, 1997.

- [11] Nyanhongo, Mazvita Mollin. "*Gender Oppression and Possibilities of Empowerment: Images of Women in African Literature with Specific Reference to Mriama Ba's SoLong a Letter, Buchi Emecheta's the Joys of Motherhood and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions.*" Diss. University of Fort Hare, 2011.
- [12] Steffoff, Rebecca. Marriage. United States: Marshall Cavendish, 2006.
- [13] Willey, Nicolae. "Ibuza vs. Lagos: The Feminist and Traditional Buchi Emecheta". *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 2. Winter (2000).

(Received 22 September 2014; accepted 02 October 2014)